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Ballad Raids and Spoilt Songs: Collection as Colonization Valentina Bold

I would like to start this discussion of collection as colonization with a quote from Jock Duncan, a singer from North East Scotland, talking about local songmaker Geordie Thomson and Gavin Greig as a collector:

Geordie wis assistant chemist at New Deer, he wis trainin there. An he wrote sangs at amazin speed. He wid hae written a sang a nicht, bit far are they aa? There's nae mony left. He niver took life seriously, ye see?...

Geordie likit the drink, ye see, an he took e train intae Aiberdeen ae Settirday nicht. The bobbies hidnae much tae dee at at time; they arrested him for drunk, for bein drunk an disorderly. Geordie wid niver have been disorderly.

Somebody must hae lettan Gavin Grieg ken, cause he gaed in, he gaed in, he took the train an peyed is fine an took im hame wi him. An e says, "Now George, hae ye ony o that songs, A want that sangs, A wint them for ma collection!"

(Bold and McKean 1999: [page #?]).

Greig's fanatical desire to accumulate songs—"I want that sangs, I wint them for ma collection"—reminds one of Walter Scott's violent-sounding "ballad raids" into the Scottish Borders, which resulted in the "spoilt songs" which so offended Margaret Laidlaw. Greig's direct action, making order from the sometimes-drunken, if not disorderly, behavior of Thomson, exemplifies the phenomenon of collection as colonization.

The colonization begins with the collector/colonizer's desire to conquer the territory, or intellectual property, of the native/performer who is, implicitly, incapable of managing it. The territory itself may be "new" (unfamiliar to the collector), or others may have previously surveyed it. Reaching the territory may involve a journey through space, or an even more arduous one through cultural and class barriers. People, too, can be colonized, from a small identifiable group to a larger group (for example, the Travelling people of Scotland) or an entire nation.

Subsequently, if the work is done properly, the territory—preferably containing large deposits of natural resources, ballads in this case—can be mapped into blocks, using a system of numbers or themes. Subsequent waves of settlers often follow the colonist. The success of Gavin Greig in North East Scotland, for instance, encouraged further forays into this area, including the research programs of the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, established in 1995.

I do not mean to suggest that ballad collecting is wholly about domination by the collector. Singers are active contributors to the creation of colonized spaces. Equally, prominent local collectors, like Greig, strive to assert locally generated identities

through a form of micronationalism on behalf of locals. Paradoxically, though, Greig discovered that many North East songs were actually of Irish origin. The intellectual and physical borders of colonial space are often in dispute, and collecting, even by sympathetic colonizers with friendly collaborators, is frequently based on profound, sometimes disturbing, imbalances of power. These are rarely explicitly mentioned, largely for fear of offending the dedicated and well-motivated people engaged in collecting.

Scotland has experienced centuries of ongoing colonization as a ballad space. I want to look, in particular, at two regions or, in this context, colonial provinces, the North East and the Borders, and focus on three varieties of collectors-as-colonizers. First is the incomer colonizer, the international, transient collector, resident for the purposes of collection. Next comes the colonizer from within, whether indigenous or a regional migrant and, lastly, the cross-cultural team, which blends both types. For this last group, experiences of the exotic culture are mitigated by local guides: the figurative “native bearers” (or amanuenses, to be polite).

Modern colonial theory has an immediate bearing on understanding collecting processes as colonization. V.G. Kiernan, for instance, draws attention to the “civilizing mission” of the colonizer (1977: 111). In song collecting, of course, the mission may be overtly the opposite: to seek a countercultural balance to modern civilization or return to a precivilized age, as in the case of James Macpherson’s collection of Ossianic material (see Macpherson 1773). Even so, the desire to impose order on this material for a literate age can be seen as a type of civilizing mission.

Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), observes, “Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their ‘others’ that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident.” [citation is missing here] Said points out that this division began with “Greek thought about barbarians” and, by the nineteenth century, it had “become the hallmark of imperialist cultures as well as those cultures trying to resist the encroachments of Europe” (1993: 111).

Collecting as colonization is most visible in the work of the colonizer from without. Bear in mind Said’s distinctions while reading a familiar passage from Kenneth Goldstein’s *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore* in which the “us” and

“them” division is obvious. This is from the section entitled “Locating Living Quarters”:

The first of the collector’s activities in the community necessarily involves his finding a place to settle.... His headquarters should be centrally located (permitting easy access to all parts of the community) and situated so that the collector’s activities will be as conspicuous as possible. A large part of rapport establishment involves the collector’s being seen frequently enough by the inhabitants for them to become used to his presence and to begin to accept him as a natural part of the local scene.... In selecting a place to settle, the collector may obtain assistance from some of the inhabitants of the community.... It will also aid in rapport establishment if the collector makes it plain by seeking such aid that he is dependent upon the local citizenry. If they have a part in his very first steps in the community, they are likely to feel responsible for him from that point on (1964: ???).

In the relationship between collector and collected, a “them” and “us” distinction may, of course, be desirable. Cultural allegiances related to points of origin must be considered, along with the practical considerations of how much territory is actually manageable. Just as the colonist focuses on target areas in the short term, so must the collector.

Goldstein’s suggestions make practical sense, but this view of fieldwork planning does seem to indicate a colonial mindset. There is the notion of being seen and seeking out a local guide, similar to the way the colonizer makes preliminary moves and finds trusted collaborators. Then there is the advice to find a suitable “headquarters,” like a military base of operations. The very notion of entering the field suggests a military campaign to gain new territory by collecting its cultural materials. Goldstein’s set of instructions recalls the process James Clifford highlights in “On Collecting Art and Culture,” by which the collector engages in “an intimate way of engaging the exotic collection [as] an area of desire, marked off and policed. The law is preoccupied with property” (19????: ???PAGE??).

Folklorists in action are, of course, a little more sophisticated. Goldstein goes on to advise the collector on cultural camouflage or blending in with the natives. The collector should not take a “grand” house or move “to the wrong side of the tracks” but select a house “which represents the average mode of existence for the community.” The transportation section calls for similar circumspection: “to travel around in a new, mile-long Cadillac or fancy sports car will immediately type the collector as a show-off, a vacationer, or worse. An inexpensive old model auto, plain luggage, and a minimum of supplies and equipment will help to type the collector as a reasonable kind of fellow” (1964: 51).

Goldstein advocates adapting to local ideologies. In North Carolina, “it could have been disastrous to my project had I indicated that I was connected with...any educational institution.” On the other hand, “Northeastern Scotland...offers no difficulties whatsoever over the educational affiliations of collectors. The Scots countryman admires education and learning” (1964: 33).

To reverse perspective, we may ask how the collector/colonizer is perceived by these local guides? Does camouflage work? Elizabeth Stewart, in her teens when Goldstein was working with her family in the North East, has a sophisticated understanding of collection as colonization. When Tom McKean and I were talking with Elizabeth about her experiences as a Traveller in her childhood, we got on the subject of how being collected affected her, and her family’s, self-image.

A aye wantit tae be noticet for ma playin. Nae fur showin aff...but fur folk tae listen til’t, cause A got *so* much enjoyment out o it, A wantit other people tae enjoy it. Tae realize, understand fit A wis daein, it’s great tae get a bit o encouragement.

Before [my aunt and mother] started [being collected] they were very modest and very shy. Even though my mother was a musician and out in the public, she was still very shy, and for someone to come and invade their private lives for a start was a wee bittie, they were a wee bittie wary. But then when Kenny showed interest in the music, an things, ken fit A mean, more interest in the music really, they likit to play, they would hae playet tae anybody for nothin, ken fit A mean, it wis jist somethin they liked daein.... It took a lot fir Lucy to start, for she wis very very shy, very modest. Ma mither, playin fir ma mother, that wis OK fur her, an she played tae Kenny an a’...she played on the box.¹⁷²

Elizabeth’s use of the word “invade” really intrigued me, as did her description of people coming out of their shell through encouragement and responding to this benevolent form of colonization. She continued,

We were excited that somebody wis wantin tae listen, A wis very young when Peter Kennedy came, but it’s exciting that somebody’s wantin tae ken yir music, especially you as a Traveller, and wantit tae ken that, and wantit tae ken yer lifestyle, but we were a bit wary fur whit were they wantin tae ken our lifestyles for? Ye ken fit A mean? An ye dinnae ken fa ye’ve got. An people comin fae America, comin fae London, till a wee place like Fetterangus.... We were a bittie bad mindet, ye ken, a bittie backward in comin forwart, because o livin awa out in the country, out in the hills campin an things fur years, jist keep tae themsels, ken.

The reaction of the indigenous people to the outsider, then, seems to have been a mixture of pride in having their traditions valued, coupled with suspicion of the nonnative colonizer.

Elizabeth also explained the way those not interviewed perceived the collectors’ interests locally. The noncolonized natives, apparently, “couldnae care less, some o

them thought it was stupid, because they were ignorant of it was happenin, they had nae interest in the academic side o things.... Nothin wis goin tae change them.... Some people can be nice tae ye but it aye comes oot.” Elizabeth was equally aware that the colonial listener was not always alert to the range of cultural nuances bound up in a lifetime’s appreciation and learning about indigenous culture. The colonizer lacked what could be termed “brocht up learning”; musically, as Elizabeth said, “they hear it in a different wey. They dinna understand it right.”

Even so, being colonized can be a positive experience with its own rewards. The interest in Stewart, as a native bearer of traditions, has given her four tours of America, beginning with an eighteen-state visit in 1972. For her music, she is a willing participant in cultural colonization: “I got so much enjoyment out o it, I wanted other people to enjoy it.” The same can be said of those colonized in Scotland in earlier generations, like James Hogg, whose creative career began with his role as an agent for Walter Scott’s *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1801–03), a product of Scotland’s age of empire. Coincidentally, one of Scott’s most active native guides, John Leyden, later died while fulfilling a real colonial role, as a surgeon in the British expedition to Java. In his introduction to the *Minstrelsy*, Scott sets out his agenda: to reclaim a regional territory of Scotland in the past through ballads and reform it for the present.¹⁷³ His aim is, specifically,

to contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally. And, trivial as may appear such an offering, to the manes of a kingdom, once proud and independent, I hang it upon her altar with a mixture of feelings, which I shall not attempt to describe (cxxxii-cxiii).

Such passionate involvement and political engagement with his material is typical of Scott and the other indigenous colonizers from within. Of course, Scott, though indigenous, was also of a different class from many of those from whom he collected. Those of the same class, like Anna Gordon, objected to being cited in print, perhaps because of Scott’s unconscious violation of colonial rules. Equally, as David Buchan stressed in *The Ballad and the Folk*, Scott used a great deal of North East material, and because of this, he was a covert, as well as overt, colonizer for his own ends.

James Hogg, as one of Scott’s major sources from the second volume of the *Minstrelsy* on, responded to this enthusiasm and experienced the same tempered wariness that Elizabeth Stewart expresses:

One fine summer day of 1801 [actually July 1802], as I was busily engaged working in the field at Ettrick House, Wat Sheil came over to me and said, that “I boud gang away down to the Ramseycleuch as fast as my feet could carry me, for there war some gentlement there wha wantit to speak to me.... I’m thinking it’s the Shirra an’ some o his gang.” I was rejoiced to hear this, for I had seen the first volumes of “The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,” and had copied a number of them from my mother’s recital, and sent them to the editor preparatory for a third volume. I accordingly went towards home to put on my Sunday clothes, but before reaching it I met with THE SHIRRA and Mr William Laidlaw.... They alighted and remained in our cottage for a space better than an hour, and my mother chanted the ballad of Old Maitlan’ to them.... I remember he asked her if she thought it had ever been printed; and her answer was, “Oo, na, na, sir, it was never printed i’ the world. For my brothers an’ me learned it frae auld Baby Mettlin, that was the housekeeper to the first laird o’ Tushilaw.” “Then that must be a very auld story, indeed, Margaret.” “Ay it is that! It is an auld story! But mair not that, except George Warton and James Steward, there was never ane o’ my songs prentit till ye prentit them yourself, an’ ye hae spoilt them a’thegither. They war made for singing, an’ no for reading; and they’re nouthier right spelled nor right setten down (???CITATION).

Like Stewart, Hogg recalls this from a distance of several decades; in the interim he had become a well-known authority on traditional culture. However, the way he presents the episode, with its physical “ride-out” for ballads and the invading “gang,” its implicit power imbalance, the need to find his Sunday clothes, and so on does suggest some real discomfort with the casting of himself, and his family, as colonial guides.

Scott sought virgin territory for colonization (unprinted ballads), and Margaret Laidlaw, though not quite shy, was certainly not comfortable with the way her songs had been treated. Hogg’s relatives seem to have felt that Scott did not properly understand the context of the texts. There is a sense of hurt family pride in this well-known anecdote, reflecting the experience of having their texts appropriated for public consumption without a full acknowledgment of either their lineage or meaning to the family. No matter how benevolent and politically appropriate, this is a form of collection as colonization.

Margaret Laidlaw, according to her son, continued, “Ye hae broken the charm noo, an’ they’ll never be sung again” (???CITATION). This anecdote reminds me of a point North East tradition bearer Stanley Robertson made. Stanley was telling us that a student had been misdirected in interpreting Jeannie Robertson’s instruction to “bring a sang oot bonnie.” The tutor had explained that this meant to sing “prettily” when the emphasis should have been on the “oot”: The song goes in, complete with

its understanding, and appreciation of its source, and should be brought out the same way.

Perhaps the ballad raider, without a direct understanding of the material of the tradition bearer, can never transmit the full value and experience of the items collected. It is likely that this is what is so disturbing to the culturally colonized. To cite Stanley Robertson and Elizabeth Stewart as sources again, Traveller culture involves intense discussions of ballads (and stories): Children are advised directly about the moral and metaphorical meanings of songs and encouraged to analyze the precise meanings, with particular relevance to Traveller culture. Naturally, those who produce “spoilt” songs lack the inside understanding of the colonized. The colonizer, therefore, acclimatizes the culture to his or her own standards. Just as curry, acquired colonially, is Scotland’s second national dish, so, too, ballads are conquered in print or performance transmissions. They conform to the collector’s cultural conventions and notions of proper presentation and order.

A variation on Scott’s experience appears in the collecting work of Hamish Henderson and the School of Scottish Studies in the North East. As a representative regional migrant, Henderson is well placed to explore and conquer: familiar with the cultural ground rules and able to engage in a form of economic colonization by mining the territory for songs, like gold. Henderson, writing about the “Folk-song Heritage of the North East” in *The Glasgow Herald* in 1981, remarks, “Aberdeenshire has continued to supply collectors with fine folk-song of every description, as the archives of the School of Scottish Studies amply testify” (1992: 132).

Henderson’s work has contributed immensely to the valuing of a national tradition as the colony becomes subverted to reclaim our territory nationally, as Scots: “Our folk-song...from the great tragic ballads to the lightest of ribald mouth tunes, is a world of its own; but it is a splendid, eloquent and poetic world, fully deserving of the attention and indeed of the love of all Scots interested in their country’s culture” (???CITATION).

As one would expect from his political background, Henderson is alert to the needs of the colonized, stressing that “it takes two (at least) to record a folk-song or folk-tale: the informant and the collector.” [you need a citation here] Nevertheless, the desire to accumulate ballads and songs, like colonial booty, in precisely located places is evident in his recollections of collecting occasions such as “the marathon recording sessions of 1954, during which the entire travelling community of

Aberdeen seems to be passing in never-ending relays through Jeannie's house in Causewayend," providing huge quantities of songs (1992: 167).

Quantity and place are two elements often present in collectors' work, and I do not mean to suggest this has wholly negative effects; obviously, bulk collection produces significant, and lasting, materials for scholars and singers. However, the cultural interpolations of the colonizers construct intellectual colonies despite their best intentions.

Having accused some of our greatest collectors of being colonists, I must reveal I am also a humble practitioner of colonialism by exposing the virtual colony of the Elphinstone Institute's *Northern Folk* CD-ROM. This is a result of cross-cultural colonization: a collaboration between the incomer colonizer (Tom McKean from the United States) and the colonizer from within (me from Fife).

Northern Folk maps out the territory of the North East of Scotland very explicitly and makes it possible to access the information wholly territorially through the map option. We have divided the traditions of the area into three main sections: Work, Recreation, and Community. However, the CD-ROM's strength as a resource, and where we hope it transcends its colonial framework, is in offering users a holistic cultural complex, where they can, at least partially, experience what people feel about tradition as a whole, not just, say, ballads. Four hundred text screens of interview and print extracts are all illustrated with still and moving images accompanied by a half-hour soundtrack. Our aim was to create as few power imbalances as we could, to be as postcolonial as possible. Making a CD-ROM with its one-minute audiovisual edits, however, led to a great many colonial negotiations.

At its best, the CD-ROM allows a colonized person to reclaim his or her territory. I conclude with Jock Duncan talking about "The Battle o' Harlaw" (Child 163). Jock was our first "native guide," and he sang the song sitting on the battlefield itself. Here he maps the song on the ground for his audience, providing contextual information he considers necessary:

It must hae been a fair battle for aa that. Ye canna sing is sang sae good as ye can sing't up here. It gies ye that, A don't know, feelin within yoursel, ye see. Far mair feelin singin't up here, far the actual battle took place, oh aye, absolutely.

A wis brocht up an hearin the first glimmerins o the "Battle o Harlaw." Especially nae far fae ma birthplace. Even at the school, we thought this wis good, ye see, studyin the [battle]. The Dominie wis good in history, he wis affa good in history an he brought the battle tae life an aa, ye ken? An ye niver forget it. [We were] fourteen, fifteen mile as the crow flies, richt ower here, look.

Practically due North o Harlaw. And many were the tales aboot it in my young day. Although a lot o them were pretty far fetched, ye know....

This isn't the true story an yet it's a popular sang. Ye widn't be very popular at all, I suppose, if ye changed the theme o't. If [ye hid] somebdy else killed instead o Lord Donald, no, no. It doesn't sound well at all, ye see. Perhaps they didn't have a good *balladeer* amonst them at the time that could have recorded the *true* story of what actually happent at the battle. I think they probably got fed up [hearin] the story....

It probably only lastit a few hours. I *don't* suppose either there wis a heavy loss o life. I mean it speaks about "fifty-two gaed hame," no. Bit *maybe* there's quite a heavy loss o life. There cuidha even been a thousand people killed on both sides, bit they hid tae *retire*.... As for *sackin*, we don't know. There's nobdy can tell us if they killed the people *out o hand*, I *don't think* they did.

Ony time A'm up here, A niver fail tae stop here an hae a look around mi. Lookin oot at Bennachie. It's jist fu o story an history an legendary tales, put it that way. Tremendous. A canna sing this sang naewey else sae good as A wid sing't up here. No. Nothing like it.

I'd an uncle sung it, ye see? My uncle Charlie Duncan; he likit singin. He hid a wee croft on the Hill o Bennagoak most o his days, although he wis foreman at the great fermtoun o Netherton o Millbren.... That wis the era o singin. My father's generation, ma granfather's generation, ma granmither's; that wis the era o singin, fin I wis a bairn. Singin aa the time. Within a space o twinty year it seemed tae disappear fae the countryside, the big ballad singers, *completely* disappear (reordered text from "Song," Bold and McKean 1999 CD-ROM).

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